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ABSTRACT

Fiction film production--begun several years ago to stimulate the participation of all students in dramatic and creative activities--has become a vital part of a school program, involving project organization and interdepartmental cooperation. The English department initiates the project, which provides ample opportunities for promoting linguistic skills through writing stories, scripts, captions, film credits, publicity articles, and letters; related skills are library research, spoken film narration, and editing. The ultimate involvement of the whole school is necessary, however, to supply actors, artists, camera and lighting technicians, costume makers, property and set teams, and sound effects specialists, thus encouraging all pupils to gain a fuller understanding of mass media communication. (JM)

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FILM-MAKING AS A SCHOOL ACTIVITY

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Six years ago, the boys and girls of the Third Year in this standard secondary school launched forth into an experiment which was destined to have far-reaching effects on the life of the school. We decided to make an attempt at film-making as a class activity.

The idea originated in the English department. In common with many other teachers of English, I had long been aware of the inadequacy of the conventional drama period in the classroom. This had always tended to be either a halting and stilted reading lesson, or a time-consuming "learning by heart" for a future stage production by a few selected pupils. I hoped that the production of a fiction film might give all the pupils a chance to participate in dramatic activity in such a way that both of those undesirable alternatives might be avoided.

It was hoped also that the whole story and script would emanate from the pupils, so that the finished product would be in a real sense their own. At the same time, I intended to bear in mind other possibilities. It might be possible for the pupils to adapt for the screen suitable short stories or poems, or extracts from good novels or plays. A further possibility might be local-study documentary films.

Since those far-off days, film-making has become a major and integral part of the work of this school. A great deal has been learnt, not only about filming and acting techniques, but also concerning such vital matters as project organization, inter-departmental co-operation, and class discipline during activity work.

The procedure in our school is as follows:

1. Purchase of equipment.
2. Class study theory and operation of sensitized film and cine-camera.
3. Teacher discusses possible themes with class, explaining essentials of a story.
4. Each pupil writes briefly at least one story idea; the best story idea is selected, after general discussion.
5. Pupils, with teacher, write Treatment in story form, and decide on Title.
6. Class study excerpts from good professional films from the points of view of screen acting and direction techniques.
7. Teacher and class compile Shooting Script, shot by shot (visuals only).
8. Pupils practise acting short scenes, without cine-camera.
9. Screen Tests: principal actors chosen.
10. Filming duties allocated to pupils: camera team, continuity, lighting, properties, costumes, make-up, etc.
11. Sets, properties and costumes made.
12. Producer makes negotiations with Headmaster, Education Committee, local authorities, police, etc., concerning scenes in film.
13. Filming: in classroom, on school stage, in playground, on location; script is used, but need not be adhered to slavishly.
14. Class view Rushes (reels of processed film) as they are returned, and offer criticisms.
15. Certain pupils study splicing technique.
16. These pupils splice all shots on one reel in correct order.
17. Class study editing techniques.
18. Class view roughly-edited film and suggest cuts and rearrangements of shots for smooth action.
19. Certain pupils cut and splice film according to written instructions from class.
20. Class view fully-edited film, and offer final editing suggestions.
21. Class write out Captions and Credits.
22. Art class draw Captions and Credits and any cartoon sequences.
23. Pupils' films completed Captions, Credits and cartoon sequences.
24. Pupils splice Captions, Credits and cartoon sequences to film.
25. Class write tentative version of narrative and dialogue.
26. Class decide on kinds of music required, and then some pupils select appropriate Mood Music discs.

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27. Pupils submit report on their work to local newspaper.
28. Some pupils view film on Editor-Viewer, and write exact and definitive Shooting Script.
29. Some pupils in Commercial class type and cyclostyle this definitive Script, leaving two columns blank for later written insertions of foreground and background sounds (voices, effects, music).
30. Class write Narrative and Dialogue in appropriate column of Sound Script, and enter asterisks in margin where each sound or piece of music is to start.
31. Class study sound recording and the tape recorder, and practise using it.
32. Class study working of projector and synchronizer.
33. Certain pupils record "Pilot Tape" in synchronization with film, consisting of "pencil taps" in accordance with asterisks in Sound Script.
34. Pupils record Narrative, Dialogue and Sound Effects at aurally-marked parts of the tape.
35. Mood Music timed, and recorded by pupils at appropriate parts of tape.
36. Class view and hear completed sound film, and subject it and other films to thorough criticism.
37. Class prepare for exhibition ("World Premiere") of film in school hall.
38. Film exhibited at World Premiere, with supporting programme and possibly a stage item, to pupils, parents and friends, with all members of class on duty.
39. Class enter film for competitions, and consider adjudicators' criticisms.
40. Class demonstrate equipment and films to interested visitors.

It may be noted that each item in this procedure, except the first one, is repeated each year with a new class. It will also be appreciated that many, if not all, of the departments in the school sooner or later find themselves drawn into this project, which is anthological, in that each pupil makes a positive contribution to a worthwhile end-product.

I find that the English department of our school initiates the project and remains its centre, though all the other subjects are vitally involved, namely, history, geography, modern studies, science, mathematics, art, music, and technical, commercial, domestic and physical education.

I propose here to consider the project in so far as it promotes linguistic skills in the English department.

An early stage in the project is the writing of story and script. This is vitally necessary, regardless of the type of film—teaching, documentary, literary, fiction or cartoon.

The first essential is an Idea. This should come from the pupils, though the teacher will naturally play his part in prompting and suggesting possible themes, as well as in gently steering the pupils away from the impracticable or the impossible.

Once the theme has been decided upon, the requirements of a story must be investigated. A chief attraction of this type of project will now begin to become evident: every step in the gradual process of film-making will be seen by the pupils to be a step towards an exciting goal, the finished film, which is to involve each one of them.

It is likely that a fictional theme will be decided upon for the school's first film. This is probably the most valuable type of film, from the viewpoint of English teaching.

The teacher should first take the opportunity of discussing fiction-writing with his pupils. The essentials of setting, characterization and plot can be investigated and exemplified. The functions of conflict, "plant," "twist," flashback, climax and denouement should be explained, and where possible incorporated into the chosen theme. The part played by hero, heroine, villain and supporting players will soon become apparent to all the pupils, who will quickly come to realize the need for careful delineation and development of character in each case.

Pupils and teacher must now set to work to construct a Treatment—the essentials of the story in a few paragraphs. Each pupil should here write his or her own version of the chosen story. All these efforts are read and corrected by the teacher, who then selects the best, to be used as the framework of the script.

It may be considered worthwhile at this stage for the pupils to rewrite brief episodes from literature in film-script form. This has its own inherent value, as well as being extremely good practice for the main task.

There are several possible ways of tackling the writing of a script in school. I have found, after a good deal of experimentation, that the most successful method is what my pupils delight to call "going into conference." Two or three large tables are placed together, and pupils and teacher sit round them, each with a Script Notebook and ball-pen. With some initial prompting from the teacher, a start is made to a detailed and grammatically correct description of what happens in every brief "shot." These shots might each be intended to last five or six seconds, but seldom more.

It is surprising how adept the pupils become in translating the events outlined in the Treatment into film-script terms. Naturally the teacher encourages the construction of accurate and vivid phrases and sentences. Fluency in scripting will improve at each session; and a surprisingly willing class will cheerfully plod along until this prolonged and apparently humdrum task reaches its conclusion.

The pupils could meanwhile be asked to compile at the back of each notebook a Glossary of technical terms and of other difficult words encountered. Constant attention has to be paid to spelling, punctuation and sentence-building during the writing of the script; and now and then a conventional class lesson may deal with linguistic difficulties found to be prevalent.

Training in meaningful brevity comes when the matter of a title has to be decided. Here is scope for originality and even wit.

After the actors and actresses have been chosen, and the young technicians trained in camera and lighting operation, the actual filming takes place, probably in and around the school. This work will doubtless be spread over a period of weeks.

The editing of isolated shots and sequences into a smooth and flowing finished product is a fascinating and challenging exercise. It involves the viewing by the whole class of the roughly-cut sequences, and their writing brief instructions for the splicing team as the showing of the film progresses.

It should not be overlooked that local newspapers might well be willing to publish accounts of the progress of the school film unit, written by pupils themselves. This seems to me to be a distinct improvement on the newspaper reports *in vacuo* which pupils are frequently called upon to produce in conventional essay periods.

Captions and credits must now be written out by the class, and later drawn and filmed in the Art department.

Most school films, we believe, are improved by a spoken narrative. The pupils should decide which parts of the story would benefit by this addition, either to clarify an obscure event or merely to add point or humour to the action. The wording of the narrative should come, as before, from the pupils, who must contrive to use clear and flowing sentences.

The narrative is written carefully and neatly by each pupil into the appropriate column of his or her cyclostyled copy of the definitive script. After this comes the absorbing task of speaking and recording the narrative (together with any dialogue considered necessary). I find that there is always a considerable amount of healthy rivalry among the boys and girls for the honour of being appointed as narrator. Often it is very effective to have the narrative written in the first person, and to involve several pupils as narrators, participants in the adventure. There can be no doubt that the recording and hearing of many attempts at natural speech is extremely beneficial to all those taking part.

The final stage of the film-making project—though this may be regarded as a by-product—could prove to be extremely valuable. Having participated in every stage of the production, the pupils will be in a unique position to subject their film to intense and detailed criticism, often searching and enlightened. After this, it is but a step to the similar criticism of other people's films—amateur and professional. A visit to the cinema or a session before the fireside goggle-box will never be quite the same again to these boys and girls.

Much library work is desirable—before, during and after the film-making. The pupils should be encouraged to use books on such widely-ranging themes as story-writing; acting; lettering; the history of film; techniques and impact of the mass media of communication; amateur photography and cinematography; costumes; and the background to the theme of a possible historical film. Pupils will benefit greatly by referring to specific books, taking notes on relevant matters, and reporting to the class and to their teacher.

The project may well involve a good deal of letter-writing. Invitations to the World Premiere of the film must be written, typed and sent out to friends, former pupils and important

guests. Again these purposeful letters are much more satisfactory than the customary letter-writing exercise in a jotter.

Finally the young film-makers will probably be called upon more than once to explain all about the project, in words of their own choosing, to interested visitors to the school. This is an admirable exercise in the development of poise and politeness as well as of language fluency.

Handbooks on every aspect of amateur film-making are readily available, from such publishers as the Focal Press (Pitman), the Fountain Press, Batsford, Evans Brothers, Faber & Faber, and others. Most of these books are extremely valuable for both teachers and pupils. Booklets and pamphlets from SEFA, SEFT and VENISS are enlightening and interesting; and there are several useful publications of the British Film Institute and the Scottish Film Council. The BFI has published a booklet on "Film-Making for Schools and Colleges." My own handbook, "How to Make Films at School," goes into the matter in very much more detail than is possible here, and is published by the Focal Press.

Periodicals which may be found useful to teachers include "Screen Education" (SEFT), "Visual Education" (NCAVAE), and the popular journals "8mm Magazine" and "Movie Maker" (both monthly) and "Amateur Photographer" (weekly).

The aims of film-making as a school activity might be summed up thus:

(a) To harness latent initiative in each pupil, of whatever mental level, in co-operative work, accomplished to the greatest possible extent by the pupils, and not merely *for* or *with* them.

(b) To give the pupils the opportunity of developing linguistic skills, both oral and written, in a purposeful and integrated way.

(c) To encourage pupils, by their experience of film-making, to gain a fuller understanding of such vital communication media as film, television, radio and recording.

(d) To involve every pupil, of all ranges of ability, in a major piece of work, with contributions from most of the school's departments, thus giving them a sense of the relevance of each branch of knowledge.

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*EXTRACT FROM SOUND SCRIPT FOR FICTION FILM

"JOURNEY INTO FANTASY"

Done with and by Class SIII Girls

Shot No.	Visuals	Distance	Intermittent Sound	Continuous Sound	Time
	SEQUENCE 12 Return to School				
204	Empty classroom: 16 boys and girls appear; they rub their eyes.	L.S.		"Blue Vibrations" 0346	14
205	Empty desks; 3 boys appear.	M.S.			
206	Empty desks; latecomers appear.	M.S.			
207	Teacher's desk and chair; teacher appears.	M.S.			
208	Anne Brownlie at desk, looking cheerful and tidy; she produces project book.	M.S.	Before long we realized that there was something different about each of us.(6)		12
209	Anne turns pages of very tidy project book.	C.U.			
210	Margaret Stevenson smiling and looking alert.	M.S.		(Fade out)	
211	Violet McGhie and Anne Dobbin smiling at each other. They vanish; they reappear, dressed in each other's clothes, and laugh.	M.S.	These two were great chums now. (2)	"Odds and Ends" (playful theme): 0259	10
212	Teacher smiles and produces sweets.	M.S.	But where was our nasty crabbit teacher? (3)		20
213	Teacher gives girls sweets.	M.S.			
214	Teacher offers sweets to boys.	M.S.	(Bell rings)	(Music ends)	20

*A copy of the complete sound script will be made available on request to C.I.T.E.